

Sunday November 24th 1963: Highweek

What will I say during tomorrow's assembly? How can I convey the shock and sadness of President Kennedy's assassination? I heard about it first on the radio on Friday and then read Alistair Cooke's first-hand account in 'The Guardian' yesterday.

I think it's important that children are aware of the world outside Newton Abbot. This is a moment in history. I try to find the positive in people, in events, but this will be tough. It is Kennedy's funeral tomorrow. I'll link it to fact that the police don't carry guns here and the death penalty. I've always had silence in assembly when someone was hanged and the last time was for James Hanratty in April last year.

Assemblies ... so many over the years. I love that time when the children come in class by class and sit on the floor and listen to music. We sing a hymn, with nature and seasons as themes: *All things bright and beautiful*. I do my bird songs; I'm perfect at a blackbird and the children think so too. If it's someone's birthday we sing 'happy birthday'. I talk about nature, the seasons. Life is still there even when you can't see it and the snow drops come peeping through, I often say. There is nothing new under the sun, said Solomon and he said true, and then I'll tell a story to demonstrate that. I ask them not to kill any insects even spiders and ants. If something special has happened, like it has now, I'll refer to it - for example space travel.

The ethos of Churchill's school is one of internationalism, a love of nature, creativity and the arts. Values from theosophy.

I really wanted to make a difference and that's why I'm a teacher. I was a student teacher at Newton Abbot Grammar School: 1917 I started. I was only 22 and my beloved fiancé had been killed in France ... Mustn't get lost in memories, doesn't do any good and we'll be united in spirit when I die.

I did enjoy teaching French but I wanted more influence. Knowles Hill came available in 1941 and I had the energy then to get it going. It was so exciting and we had a good team of teachers. We started with 24 pupils but after two years we had a waiting list and more than 150 pupils.

What things stand out? There was the time when Esme wanted to find out what happens if you put a thermometer in front of a fire; of course, the mercury comes out at the top. I'm afraid I was a bit cross which I hardly ever am. It doesn't do any good to shout, as I tell the children: no one will hear you. There were a few scary times during the War. We had evacuees: I remember Shirley Hudson who was really mischievous and slid down the banisters and broke the basin in the turret room. There is always a place for disabled children.

We did very well. Knowles Hill was too small so in 1958 we got Churchills as the junior school where I'm the headmistress. Churchills has plenty of room in the house, and great grounds with trees and wild spaces where the children can play. British Bulldog can get a bit wild and I noticed the other day when Catherine, who is anyway very untidy, had tears in her school dress and lots of stings from stinging nettles.

The little ones always have a rest on camp beds after lunch, Janet and John, kindergarten, writing, learning poetry, plays - at the moment it's *The Snow Queen*. When it's fine, we down tools and go on a nature walk.

I still teach French, though I get tired now and running the school is quite demanding. We use *Coquerico* and the children all have French names and I encourage them to have a good French accent. ... Oo, France! My father was a captain on the channel ferries and we lived in Folkestone. He called me Fanny and others called me Jan, though I'm Florence really, and of course to all the pupils and parents, Miss Rainford.

The French went through so much in both wars. I've worked for peace, am a pacifist and I am proud to have contributed a bit by translating at the League of Nations.

I care so deeply about so much, in a quiet way.

Mozart, Chopin, Berlioz are a real comfort for me, But the pupils prefer these modern bands: The Beatles and songs like *She loves you*, *Please please me*. Not really music in my view. I told them the other day that it wouldn't last; Beethoven is eternal but no one will have heard of the Beatles in 50 years' time.

Nearly time for my supper, always vegetarian. Phone call with my brother Herbert as usual. I am now nearly 70 so no wonder I'm tired. Better get back to preparing for tomorrow's assembly.

When I died on August 4th 1978 the paper said: 'Her real inspiration for her teaching was her love of life and nature and her unwavering desire to share that love with the children, staff and colleagues. Remembered by generations.'

Her ways were ways of pleasantness and all her paths were peace.

Miss Florence Rainford

Catherine Putz